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ABSTRACT

Research confirms the fact that violence is a growing problem in American society. The frequency of reports of youth involved in violent acts reflects an inability to handle conflicts in safe, constructive ways among this age group. Although the business of schools is to educate, many students are more concerned with their own safety than learning. Conflict is a normal part of life. Too often conflict is seen as something that needs to be eliminated instead of something that can be worked through constructively. Unlike dead end strategies of confrontation or avoidance, communication through a conflict can lead to knowledge and growth for self and others. Instead of eliminating the symptoms of violence, we must return to the origin of the disease where violence begins. Teaching conflict resolution skills offers hope as these skills can assist students in communicating effectively and overcoming disputes; allowing emotional, social, and intellectual growth to take place in the process. Peer Mediation is a method of conflict resolution that enables people involved in a conflict to reach a mutually acceptable agreement with the help of a neutral mediator. Eleven basic steps of the peer mediation process are listed and a case example is used. Seven steps to implement a peer mediation program are provided. Eight recommended resources are included. Contains 15 references. (JBJ)

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A Series of
Solutions and Strategies

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER

June 1994 Number 9

Resolving Conflict through Peer Mediation

by
Marie Rogers

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The Problem of Violence

Jonathan and Derrick, both juniors in high school, sit in the guidance office unable to look at each other. Derrick has just recently returned to school after a two week expulsion for possession of a handgun on school grounds. Derrick has admitted that his reason for bringing the gun to school was to give Jonathan, "a scare he wouldn't forget." As they both tell their sides of the story, they are asked to think back to when the conflict between them originated. Many instances of confrontations in school and at social events come to mind, but still no reason for initial aggravation is found. Finally, after more than an hour of thinking back through their high school and junior high years, they come to an agreement that the conflict between them originated in 8th grade when both were trying out for the junior varsity basketball team. Jonathan, who was put into the position of point guard, called one play and then ran another, leaving Derrick in the wrong place at the wrong time, costing him, he thought, a position on the team. Later, when Jonathan made the team and Derrick did not, the resentment and anger continued to escalate for three years.

Media coverage of violence and school safety is a daily event. Is violence a growing problem, or are newspapers, television, and magazines simply appealing to the "shock element," illustrating how destructive human beings can be?

Research confirms the fact that violence is a growing problem in American society. Many factors contribute to the increase in violent acts including the glamorization and accessibility of firearms, the availability of illegal drugs, the growing appeal of gang membership, and the unrelenting cycle of poverty.

Weapon possession is no longer "just for show," as 1988 marks the first year that the 15- to 19-year-old male was more likely to die from a gunshot wound than from natural causes (Lawton, 1991). Conflicts between students no longer end in fist fights, but in fatalities.

The frequency of devastating reports of youth involved in violent acts reflects an inability to handle conflicts in safe, constructive ways among this age

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group. Video games and influence of the media create the illusion that after killing or heroically conquering any obstacle in your path through violent means, it is easy to walk away from the situation without any harm done. The callousness of the younger generation to the living, feeling human beings that surround them allows them to feel little remorse for any action taken, as long as it "doesn't hurt me."

Violence in Society—Violence in Schools

It is an unfortunate fact that in the United States, "the homicide rate is four times greater than the nearest industrialized country; and the use of firearms in these homicides is four times greater than most countries"(Dirks, 1993). Schools mirror society, and violence in schools is up as well. Although the business of schools is to educate, many students are more concerned with their own safety than how to analyze a poem or solve a mathematical problem. How can learning take place with "three million school-based thefts and violent crimes occurring in schools each year" (Crowley, 1993)?

Many students live in fear of the dangers that surround them, not only in metropolitan areas, but suburban and rural settings as well. O'Malley's (1993) survey of 6th-12th graders reports that:

- 35% said they didn't think they would live a long life.
- 60% said they could get a handgun if they wanted.
- 40% said they feel afraid of handgun violence at school every day.

A study by Learning Publications (1988) reports that, "...eight percent of students skipped one day of school a month because they feared for their safety." Coulter's survey (1989) found that, "...each month, about 282,000 students are physically attacked in America's secondary schools." When the basic need to feel safe in their surrounding environment is not met, how can children learn at any level in the educational setting? As Maslow's theory of social development suggests, "...if a person's lower [more basic] needs are not met, that person must spend time and energy trying to meet them, thus stunting the normal drive for love, esteem, and self-fulfillment" (Berger, 1988).

Often students find their need to feel safe and a sense of belonging in the context of gang membership. Children join gangs at young ages, believing that gang membership offers the best protection from the dangers on the streets and in school. When a student joins a gang, a cycle is set into motion that plays on the insecurities of students. As one student needs to have the security of being part of a gang for protection, other students are threatened and intimidated, making gang membership (a group of individuals that protects its members) more and more appealing. A high school English teacher from Castro Valley, California, Jim Burke, describes the appeal: "Week after week, I see these kids trying to create their own families. They do this because so many of them have no family at home that provides them with affection, with a sense of belonging. They feel that no one at home cares about them so much that they would smash someone who insulted them, as their Raiders-jacketed friends would do"(Burke, 1991).

These fears are not limited to the students. Teachers are aware of the danger that surrounds them while at work. Crowley (1993) reports that, "One of every five teachers can cite incidents of verbal or physical threats from students during the past 12 months, [and] ...crimes on or near school grounds have reached 16,000 per day, or one for every six seconds school is in session." A survey based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 teachers found that one-third feel their peers as well as their students are less eager to go to school because of the violence in schools (Metropolitan Life, 1993).

Strategies Currently Used to Decrease Violence in Schools

What strategies are schools using to combat this outpouring of violent behavior? Traditional forms of

disciplining students for violent acts include in–school suspension (ISS), out–of–school suspension (OSS), and expulsion. The Metropolitan Life teacher survey of 1993 found that 81 percent of schools suspended students involved in violent acts. Although the strategies of suspension and expulsion are meant to give students a firm warning that their behavior will not be tolerated, these strategies can also send a harsh message of rejection that seems to "push" the student out of school, increasing the chances of eventual school dropout. Students need to learn the basic skill of expressing strong feelings in nonviolent ways, instead of being separated and stripped of their individuality. Suspension strategies only move the problem from one location to another—either isolating the student in a room or pushing the student back out into the violent streets. Newer preventive strategies include the installation of security guards, metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and identification badges. Other commonly used strategies include instituting a dress code, establishing a disciplinary code, and counseling students and their families. Metal detector programs and punishments alone cannot end youth violence; measures to change the behavior patterns of students must be taken.

How Students Manage Conflict

Children learn by example. Unfortunately, some role models display destructive ways of handling anger, frustration, and conflict. Abusive parents send the message to their children from an early age that the "best" way to deal with conflict is through violent means. At home, in the community, and among their peer groups, children are often times encouraged to lash out, make threats, defend themselves, and take revenge when conflict arises. Handling conflict in nonviolent ways is something many children may never have been taught.

Statistics illustrate that when students encounter conflict many resort to confrontation, an aggressive method of handling conflict. This method presents an arrangement where the aggressor wins and the other person loses. Hostility and physical damage result from the win-lose mentality, an attitude detrimental to cooperation. In the state of South Carolina, out of 5,000 students that were surveyed across the state, "thirty-three percent of the females surveyed and 50% of the males surveyed engaged in physical fights within the last 12 months" (South Carolina Youth, 1991). In their desire to punish or get even, these individuals are taking violent action that harms themselves as well as others.

Other students choose not to handle problems at all by running from confrontation altogether. People who avoid conflict lose opportunities to express their own feelings and convictions. When conflict is avoided, the psychological need to be understood is neither acknowledged nor met. Thus, people who avoid conflict lack control of their lives. As they do not express feelings, they damage not only their self-esteem, but also damage their relationships with others.

Conflict is normal and is part of everyone's life. How each person chooses to handle conflict determines whether the experience is beneficial or detrimental to his or her growth. Too often, conflict is seen as something that needs to be eliminated or removed, instead of something that can be worked through and used constructively. Most of the time, conflict occurs due to miscommunication. Someone misunderstands the action, words, or intentions of someone else. Unlike the dead end strategies of confrontation or avoidance, **communication through a conflict can lead to knowledge and growth for self and others**.

The Heart of the Problem

Instead of eliminating the symptoms of the problem of violence, we must return to the origin of the disease where violence begins. Any child will do things that are wrong. A child never has to be taught how to lie, or to fight with his or her brother or sister—it is something that naturally occurs. Children need boundaries, and parents typically correct inappropriate behavior at a young age, teaching children what behaviors are right or wrong, acceptable and unacceptable.

When young people are faced with problems, their natural response is to resort to confrontation or avoidance. These alternatives are harmful and lead to recurring problems when a student either lashes out in the face of conflict or avoids it by suppressing anger and fear. Solving problems effectively is not an innate skill of students, but is something that must be taught and put into practice. Teaching of conflict resolution skills offers hope as these skills can assist students in communicating effectively and overcoming disputes, allowing emotional, social, and intellectual growth to take place in the process. Programs involving students and teachers have proved to be most successful because of the joint agreement to share in the awareness of common norms and strategies for handling disputes.

The Importance of Early Intervention

Early intervention programs aim to teach students how to be aware of and overcome the violent society that surrounds and influences them. Such programs, implemented in classrooms of preschool and/or elementary school-aged children, teach nonviolent behavior, a life skill that will continue to develop in the later years of adolescence and adulthood. Children as young as preschool and kindergarten age can learn the conflict resolution skills of empathy, impulse control, and managing their anger.

Not only schools, but parents, communities, child care providers, and health care providers can help to build the critical foundation of equipping children with the awareness and skills to manage and work through impulsive, aggressive actions. The Choosing Non-Violence (CNV) Program of Chicago found that when primary school students were asked to think about how they express their strong feelings, they "...spontaneously shared a list of extreme violent responses, such as breaking windows, beating up little kids, destroying loved items or works of their own art, and so forth" (Parry, 1993). Based upon these findings the program eventually developed a strategy of early intervention to redirect the common destructive tendencies already instilled in students of such young ages. The key concepts of the CNV program are to help children:

1) understand what violence is; be able to name it in their lives, their toys, their choices...

2) realize they have the power to choose and control how they will act...

3) learn the power of language so they can use it to express how they feel, to protect and defend themselves without being violent (Parry, 1993).

Young children should be made aware of the violence in their environment, and of their own tendencies to be violent. They can take responsible control of their own actions and the ways that they handle strong feelings at very young ages.

A Results-Oriented Strategy—Peer Mediation

Peer Mediation is a method of conflict resolution that enables people involved in conflict to reach a mutually acceptable agreement with the help of a neutral "mediator." This mediator, instead of being the adult referee who simply steps in and makes the calls, is usually only slightly older than the disputants involved. Mediations can involve students as young as third and fourth grade mediators, and first and second grade disputants. Only the students involved in the conflict and the mediator are included in the mediation process which usually occurs around a table. (The scenario on pages 5-8, "Peer Mediation in Action," allows a more complete understanding of how the peer mediation process can bring about a peaceful agreement.)

The peer mediation process consists of 11 basic steps:

1) Mediator asks each participant to agree to adhere to certain rules:

- to try to solve the problem
- not to interrupt others while they talk
- not to put down or threaten while you tell your side of what happened
- to be honest

(Continued on Page 9)

PEER MEDIATION

In Action...

BY: Jodie Rogers

PAULA STOPS IN HER STEPS WHEN SHE RECOGNIZES THE CONFLICT OCCURRING IN FRONT OF HER.

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The Process	Peer Mediation In Action
	Paula turns the corner and stops in her steps when she recognizes the conflict occurring in front of her. This must be something pretty serious for Allison and Jill to be fighting; they're usually the best of friends. Her impulse is to ignore the situation and mind her own business. But because she is a school mediator, she knows a better way to handle conflict. She walks toward Allison and Jill, and as their voices lower she knows they are aware of her presence.
	What does SHE want? Both Allison and Jill are irritated with this interruption in their fighting and look at Paula with the same anger they direct at each other. "Guys, come on, let's talk this over," Paula says.
	No response is given at first, but a crossing of Allison's arms and then Jill's arms. Then Allison says, "There's nothing to talk over."
	"Well, that's not how it looks. Whatever is going on between you two needs to be settled." Paula says, hoping that they agree. "Come on, Mrs. Patrick is still in her room, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind us coming in to talk."
1. Mediator presents rules to be followed during mediation.	*Here goes nothing, Paula thinks. "I want you both to know there's a way we could handle this conflict you and Jill are having where you both win and can walk away in agreement. That is, if you both WANT to work it out." Paula receives a nod from both girls. "All right, there's something that we need to agree on before we get anywhere with any of this, and that is whether or not you WANT to solve this problem." Paula says, "Unless you really want to work through this problem, we're all wasting our time, right?" Paula continues, "I'll assure you that anything that is said in this mediation will not be repeated by me, that is, it's CONFIDENTIAL. There are some rules to mediation, and they're just followed to work things out in the best way without confusion or setbacks. These rules are that you don't interrupt each other when you're talking, you don't add any name-calling or put-downs when you tell your side of the story, you're to be as honest as you can, and most important, you're to work hard to solve the problem. Can you agree to follow these rules?"*
2. Participants agree to follow rules.	*Allison and Jill both nod, and Paula says, "Now Allison, why don't you share your side of the story first, and remember, be totally honest."*
3. Participant No. 1 tells his/her side of what occurred in the conflict.	*Allison looks at Jill and begins, "Yesterday on the phone, I told Jill that I thought Verlyn was a nice guy and that I wouldn't mind getting to know him better. Well, today when I walked into class Joanne said 'Hey, Allison, why don't you ask Verlyn to the dance?' Well, I didn't tell Joanne anything about liking Verlyn. I knew that Jill must have said something to her."*

Paula replies, "Let me see if I understand. Allison, you told something to Jill on the phone and feel that she must have shared some of the things that you told her with someone else. In science class today, Joanne mentioned one of the things you told to Jill, and you would rather that Joanne had not been told these things. Is that what happened Allison?" Allison nods. "Could you tell me what your feelings are?" Paula asks.

4. Mediator summarizes for clarification.

Allison eventually replies, "I guess I'm embarrassed because now Verlyn knows I like him, and I really didn't want him to know so soon. But most of all, I guess I feel hurt because Jill shared something I told her with somebody else, and I guess I feel like she's been talking behind my back."

5. Feelings are discussed.

Paula restated Allison's feelings, "You feel embarrassed because something that you didn't want others to know, they know, and you feel kind of betrayed because a secret you thought you had with Jill seems to have been told."

6. Mediator restates feeling.

"Yeah, that's exactly how I feel," Allison says.

Paula then turned toward Jill in her seat. "How about telling your side of the story now, Jill."

"Well," Jill begins, "I really didn't know that I wasn't supposed to tell anyone what Allison had said. I didn't see any harm done when Joanne asked me who Allison was taking to the Sadie Hawkins dance, and I told her that she might ask Verlyn. Then everything happened so fast, and before I knew it, Joanne said something across the room to Allison about taking Verlyn to the dance, then Allison looked at me. She was so angry. I realized that I should not have said anything, but there was really nothing I could do about it."

7. Participant No. 2 tells his/her side of what occurred in the conflict.

"Let me see if I'm understanding what you've said, Jill." Paula takes a deep breath and begins, "Joanne asked you who Allison was taking to the dance and you told her that Verlyn was a possibility. You didn't realize that saying what you did would lead to an embarrassing scene in science class, but it did, and you know that Allison is angry with you."

8. Mediator summarizes for clarification.

"How are you feeling now, Jill?" Paula asked.

"I feel angry with Joanne. I am also hurt because after being such a close friend of Allison's, I never thought she could get so mad. I mean, I didn't feel like she would listen to me or try to understand that I didn't mean to hurt her feelings. I know now that it was a mistake to tell Joanne about Verlyn, but I guess there's nothing I can do about it. Allison didn't ask me not to tell anybody, but now I know I should not have."

9. Feelings are discussed.

10. Mediator restates feeling.	*Paula restates what Jill has said, "You feel frightened about how angry Allison could be with you. You feel, as you put it, it was a 'mistake' to tell Joanne something about Allison asking Verlyn to the dance."* *"Yeah," Jill replies, "That's how I feel."*
11. Mediator asks if anyone needs to contribute anything	*"Do either of you have anything to add?" Paula asks and both Allison and Jill shake their heads no. She continues, "Allison, what could you do to solve this problem?"*
12. Both participants contribute	*Allison thought and then answered, "I guess that in the future I could let Jill know about the things I want to keep between the two of us. I also could make an effort to listen to her side of the story next time instead of getting so mad and wanting to hit her."* *"Jill, do you agree that this solution could work?" Paula asked.* *"Yeah, I guess so," Jill replied.* *"Could you add anything to the solution for this problem?" Paula asks and waits for a response.*
	"I could make an effort to think about how things I say could hurt others, especially in my friendship with Allison. And, of course, if she tells me something in confidence, I would not tell anyone. I guess if Joanne or anyone asks me anything about another person, I should pretty much tell them to ask the person involved." Jill concludes.
13. Mediator summarizes the presented solution to the problem.	*Paula proceeds with the mediation process, "Now that we've talked about how to solve this problem, let me try to put together what has been said. All right, Allison, you have agreed to let Jill know when something that you tell her needs to be kept confidential, and to make an effort to listen to Jill, instead of wanting to hit or yelling at her when you feel angry. Jill, you have agreed to keep things confidential that you believe Allison might not want to share with anyone else. If anyone asks you about some information that you are unsure of sharing, you've decided to encourage them to ask Allison, or whomever, themselves....How does that sound?"*
14. Participants work together on the solution.	*"Sounds good to me," Allison says, and Jill nods.*
15. Mediator checks to see if participants feel that the problem has been solved. If so, participants are dismissed. If not, mediator directs the group back to Step No. 12.	*"Yeah, sounds like we can work together to solve a problem, and everyone wins," adds Jill.* *Paula continues, "Do you feel like the problem has been solved?...be honest..." Both girls nod in agreement and finally look at each other, knowing that their awful problem has been overcome.*